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PRESERVATION

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Saving Montana's Railroad Structures

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Trains can still be seen and heard as they move freight and raw materials from city to city, but as most of us know the days when trains provided passenger transportation on a large scale and hauled our mail has ended. Few of us are aware, however, that the structures that were built for the railroads are also in jeopardy. This remarkably clear 1917 photograph shows one structure that has survived. Gildford's depot and grain elevators served both Highline farmers and the Great Northern Railway, and the depot still stands to remind the community of how and why it came into being. But in many Montana communities that are no less the children of railroads, the buildings that remind them of their past are gone or are in danger of demolition. This issue of Preservation *is meant to provoke your interest and your activism in this important problem.*

In this issue of Preservation

Consider this issue of *Preservation Post* a long overdue cry of alarm, a rallying shout for assistance and interest. Montana's historic railroad structures stand in jeopardy of loss or removal, and at a rate more rapid than at any time in our past. Federal regulations and polite appeals have not forestalled, nor even postponed, the loss or removal of depots, bridges, trestles, tunnels, freight yards, and miles of track around the state. Success in saving remnants of our rail history—limited at best in comparison to the importance of our railroading past—has been the result of vocal, organized, and persistent local efforts. Given the breadth of the problem, we want to alert all of you to the need, and also give you new information about preserving Montana's railroad structures. In this issue, we hope to prompt you to ask questions, to see the manifestations of railroading that exist in your part of the state in a new perspective, and to organize with others and express your concern.

We are *not* doing several things that you might expect. We are *not* attempting to convince you that railroads played a pivotal role in the development and settlement of Montana—you know that. And we are *not* going to discuss whether current Burlington Northern (BN) policies regarding rail service in Montana are economically sound—we are not expert in that, although BN policies have a bearing on which buildings are threatened. Finally, given our limited space, we must leave unmentioned considerable information and advice. We have likely missed some success stories, and you may know better methods of securing reuse of historic buildings than we do. As usual, we urge you to call to tell us what you know and ask for more information.

Let me summarize the problem. For all practical purposes, Montana is today a one-railroad state. BN owns most of the trackage built by the Great Northern, the Northern Pacific, and many smaller companies. The Union Pacific, the Butte, Anaconda and Pacific, the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Saint Marie Line, and the state of South Dakota still maintain limited service, respectively, in the southwestern and eastern portions of Montana. Since 1970, when BN emerged as independent from the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy line, it has pursued the creation of a "consolidated system" in Montana. BN has taken actions to make their operations as lean and limited as economically necessary. Becoming consolidated, more specifically, has translated into two separate categories: line abandonments, which include abandonment of all railroad-owned facilities, and disposal of superfluous buildings along active routes. Both actions influence the fate of railroad structures, and both are occurring with greater frequency now than at any recent time. Finally, abandonment of major portions of the Milwaukee Road, as a result of its bankruptcy in 1980, poses a major threat to many historic structures.

As BN abandons lines or buildings, however, only two regulatory agencies appear to be involved: the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) and the Montana Public Service Commission (PSC). Line abandonments require ICC approval and building closures in Montana require PSC approval. Although the ICC is charged by federal law to follow regulations designed to ensure that loss to historic buildings be avoided or mitigated, they uniformly ignore those regulations. The PSC's review of building demolition or surplusing considers the need for railroad service and does not consider a building's historical significance.

Despite the legal recourse available against the ICC for ignoring federal regulations, the actual "saving" of depots and other structures in Montana has been the result of local interest, lobbying, and concerted persuasion. Also to date, most—though not all—of the "success" stories have occurred in larger communities. Depots in small towns or structures in rural areas stand in the greatest jeopardy.

Not only is Montana's railroad history very significant, but also the physical remains of that history are critical to our understanding and enjoyment of Montana's past. And we find that preserving many of these railroad structures need not be burdensome. Depots, for example, can be put to a variety of productive, self-supporting uses in communities of nearly any size. We urge you to read this issue and ask questions; we urge you to look at the railroad history in your community. We do not believe that the tangible reminders of Montana's railroad history should be allowed to melt quietly away without protest. These resources deserve a good deal of our fuss, care, and energy.

Marcella Sherfy

Railroad Depots Saved:

Very few of Montana's railroad depots have been adapted to new uses, although it is a sure way to secure, at least for a time, their preservation. Negotiations for title to the buildings is often a long and tedious process that is further complicated by the necessity of purchasing or leasing the land itself. In a majority of cases, especially with the small wood-frame structures, Burlington Northern insists that they be removed from the railroad right-of-way. Each of these cases, of course, is unique, but they all require careful negotiations for a successful rehabilitation to result. If you are concerned about a depot in your home town, we can put you in touch with individuals and organizations that have successfully preserved and rehabilitated railroad depots.

KEVIN, *Great Northern Depot*

Kevin's one-story depot is a wood-frame structure that is typical of those once found in many of Montana's smaller communities. In 1979, the Kevin Economic Development Corporation, a community-based civic action organization, purchased the building and, at the insistence of Burlington Northern, moved it from the railroad right-of-way. Donations of money and labor from the community, combined with a small amount of county funding, enabled the organization to adapt the building for re-use as a senior citizens' center.

MISSOULA, *Milwaukee Depot*

The Milwaukee Depot Associates, a group of private developers, purchased and rehabilitated the masonry, mission-style building. The old depot now houses a restaurant and offices.

ALBERTON, *Milwaukee Depot*

Donations for the purchase of the building and the land upon which it sits were given by individuals in the community. In addition, funds from a Community Development Block Grant were used for the building rehabilitation and for the purchase of additional land. The Town of Alberton, the building's owner, uses a portion of the building as a town hall, while the remainder serves as a community center.

ICC and Line Abandonments

As with all other federal agencies, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) is required to comply with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, its amendments, and the act's implementing regulations, 36CFR800. Yet, the ICC has rarely been in compliance with those regulations when they have approved line abandonments in Montana. The ICC staff, however, has recently recognized the degree of the ICC's non-compliance and is now lobbying for improvement in the agency's policies. What is it that the regulations require the ICC to do? Briefly, the ICC is obligated to:

- identify and provide historical and architectural information on all structures (depots, bridges, track, trestles, tunnels) that are considered historic (those built before 1940) and might be affected by line abandonment;
- seek our opinion and that of the National Register of Historic Places staff on which structures meet National Register criteria;
- identify any structure judged by the Register staff to meet its criteria and carry out plans to avoid or mitigate loss to the property as a result of abandonment. (The ICC need not guarantee preservation of the structure, but it must demonstrate a means to avoid or lessen harm while accomplishing its program.)

Even if this process were followed it would not guarantee preservation of railroad structures, but it would afford the Montana public much greater opportunity to comment on the value of these buildings and offer solutions for their use or maintenance.

Success Stories in Montana

WEST YELLOWSTONE, *Union Pacific Depot and Dining Lodge*

The two rustic-style buildings and the land on which they sit are part of the Oregon Short Line Terminus Historic District and were donated to the City of West Yellowstone by the Union Pacific Railroad. The privately owned Museum of the Yellowstone is housed in the Depot and the Federation of Fly Fishers is currently undertaking the rehabilitation of the Dining Lodge as its international headquarters. The buildings are leased from the City of West Yellowstone.

LIVINGSTON, *Northern Pacific Depot*

The City of Livingston undertook a feasibility study of the potential re-use possibilities of these buildings prior to their donation by Burlington Northern to the city. The property on which the buildings sit and a fourteen-block "green belt" area were leased on an indefinite basis to the City of Livingston. The city has mothballed the buildings and has undertaken a nation-wide campaign to advertise the availability of the buildings for private development. A Depot Committee has been appointed by the city to review proposals to ensure that the development of the building complements and is compatible with the city's goals for the adjacent historic district.

KALISPELL, *Great Northern Depot*

Burlington Northern donated the building and the land to the City of Kalispell. A portion of the rehabilitation expenses came from a Community Block Grant with additional funds donated by the Chamber of Commerce, the major tenant in the building. Space is also leased to a variety of other community service organizations.

GREAT FALLS, *Great Northern Depot*

Billed at the time of its construction in 1910 as the "finest depot on the Great Northern line," the building is now the corporate headquarters for the Great Falls Gas Company, which undertook an extensive rehabilitation of the structure. The gas company purchased the building from a partnership that had negotiated with Burlington Northern for the sale of the building and land. Industrial revenue bonds funded the rehabilitation.

BILLINGS, *Northern Pacific Depot*

A private development company recently purchased this Beaux Arts Eclectic style depot from Burlington Northern with a long term lease on the land. The building functions as an anchor to the Billings Townsite Historic District, which has seen sporadic development over the last few years. It is hoped that the first-class restaurant and deluxe office space that will soon occupy the building will instill the confidence needed to spur additional rehabilitation in the district.

RED LODGE, *Northern Pacific Depot*

Burlington Northern donated this one-story wood-frame depot to the Carbon County Arts Guild. Although Burlington Northern usually requires the removal of these smaller buildings from their right-of-way, they have granted the arts guild a lease on the property. Donated labor and materials, combined with a grant from the cultural and aesthetic portion of the state's Coal Tax Trust Fund, have been used in the rehabilitation. When completed, the building will contain an art gallery and classroom space.

The Northern Pacific depot in Livingston (upper left) stands as a saved railroad structure but the City of Livingston has yet to find a user for the grand, architect-designed building, although the city has nationally advertised the building's availability. Persistent requests to Burlington Northern about the depot in Red Lodge (below), however, paid off for the Carbon County Arts Guild. Although the depot has changed architecturally over time, as a comparison of the historical photo (lower left) shows, it remains a link to the past for the community. The building will stand as a reminder of Red Lodge's history, while it serves today and tomorrow as an art center. Importantly, the building remains on its original site, making it all the more historically important.

What You Can Do & How To Do It

If you are interested in historic railroad buildings or structures or wonder if they might be in jeopardy, please keep reading. We have some ideas about what you might consider and how you can help preserve these historic structures.

- To determine whether track or buildings along the line might be under consideration for abandonment, ask as early as possible, be specific in your questions, and be persistent. Line abandonments, even those approved by ICC, occur within a relatively short period of time.
- To check on abandonments, call our office, the Public Service Commission in Helena (444-2549), the local or Washington, D.C. offices of Montana's Representatives or Senators, and Burlington Northern's office in Billings (256-4400).
- Talk early with the railroad in question if you learn that demolition or surplusing a line is likely. Be courteous, personal, informed, and persistent. Last minute heroics, no matter how well intentioned, often alienate rather than convince.
- Also talk early with our staff and Montana's Representatives and Senators if you have an interest in saving or reusing a structure. Montana's congressional delegation has been very interested in preserving Montana's history and in the effects of railroad actions in the state.
- If you want to save a structure in jeopardy, begin immediately to think of how it could be reused or preserved, especially if you or others could purchase or lease it. In virtually all of the "success stories" described in this issue, BN asked interested parties—communities or organizations—to develop specific and practical plans for reuse of the building. BN is interested in knowing that sale or donation of rights will not leave the structure stranded—allowed to deteriorate further.

We strongly urge you to consider reuse that makes the building economically self-sufficient. Buildings that are used for non-profit purposes require additional support in the form of donated funds, grants, or some form of public money. If you choose a non-profit use, be sure your organization is prepared to find necessary support. Our sense is that BN and others who might help you acquire the building are most impressed by practical proposals.

Remember the federal tax incentives for rehabilitation. They may be utilized for substantial rehabilitation work on structures that are occupied for income-producing purposes if they are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. These tax incentives are currently the most reliable form of financial assistance for preservation.

- The National Trust for Historic Preservation has recently published literature on fundraising for historic preservation projects. It contains sound ideas for local groups. For copies, write directly to the Trust or call us.
- If BN wants you to move the structure off site, have a response planned. Structures have much more significance in their original location, and some communities have been successful in leasing or purchasing depots in their original locations. BN, however, may demand removing the building from the site as part of any lease or purchase agreement. Think through your response to this issue in advance.
- Consider preparing a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for the building in question. Whether or not you secure the necessary owner's consent for the listing, the process will be valuable. The material will assist you or us in requiring the ICC to comply with the federal historic preservation regulation if a line abandonment is involved. The nomination also indicates your serious interest in the building's historical value and your desire to preserve it. Call us for nomination materials.

What to Read on Railroads

Most of us have read about railroading and we are familiar with the romance of railroad building. Below, we introduce several books and articles that tell us about other aspects of the railroad's impact on our history.

Alwin, John A., *Patterns of Montana Towns: 1860-1920* (M.A. thesis, University of Montana, 1972—on file at the Montana Historical Society).

The expansion of railroad service in Montana during the 1880s and 1890s made possible a wider dispersion of people. Strings of small towns cropped up along the rail lines. Established towns either moved themselves closer to the new line (Demersville to Kalispell and Coulson to Billings) or had the good fortune to be chosen as railroad division points (Missoula, Helena, Miles City) and ensured their commercial prosperity. The presence of railroads spurred the mineral and stock raising industries. To expand business, the railroads actively encouraged agricultural settlement of the eastern part of the state. Between 1880 and 1890, Montana's population increased 360 per cent. Alwin points to the horse and wagon as one factor limiting the distance to 10-15 miles that a farmer could manage to haul grain to the railroad. The construction of clusters of grain elevators along the rail line respected this limitation.

Bohi, Charles and Roger H. Grant, *The Country Railroad Station in America* (Pruett Publishing Company, Boulder, Colo., 1978).

Grant, Roger H., "The Standardized Railroad Station on the Great Plains, 1870-1920," *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture*, ed. Brian Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Neb., 1979), 119-137.

To save costs and hedge bets, the railroad commonly supplied small (10' × 22'), prefabricated, portable depot buildings for its newly founded townsites on the plains. As a town prospered, the railroad often would move the early depot on down the line and replace it with another standard design depot of increased size, with more elaborate architectural detailing. The passenger/freight combination depot and the variation of that plan, which included living quarters for the local agent, were the predominant designs built in Montana and possess a unique architectural significance. Since the 1960s, the number of standardized depots still in existence has greatly diminished.

Hudson, John C., "Towns of the Western Railroad," *Great Plains Quarterly* 2 (Winter 1982): 41-54.

The role of the western railroads in the early planning of thousands of cities and towns was not subtle. Townsite planning, marketing, and early business development were in large part controlled by the railroad companies in those towns established along the newly built lines. Railroad-platted towns are easily recognized. The plans consisted of grids of streets laid out in three predominant ways: the center rail line bisecting the town with business districts planned, but not always constructed, on either side (Billings, Saco, etc.); the center rail with a business district set perpendicular to the rail; and the very popular T-plan, with a rail line at one end of town and the business district running perpendicular to the depot (Kalispell, Livingston, Great Falls, Scobey, Whitefish, and many more). Commercial lot size was commonly only 24' wide, which encouraged the growth of numerous small businesses and buildings of a similar size and shape.

Isch, Flora Mae Bellfleur, "The Importance of Railroads in the Development of Northwest Montana," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 41 (January 1950).

Reps, John W., *Cities of the American West: A History of Frontier Urban Planning* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1979).

Full color birdseye overviews and numerous city plat maps beautifully illustrate the common practices of the railroads' city planners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All of the railroads of the West were involved directly directly or indirectly (subsidiaries) in early townsite planning and development. The ideas for how the new towns of the West were to look most often originated with planners from the East. Speculators commonly bought up large parcels consisting of numerous blocks in the newly platted townsites. In some cases, expectations were more than fulfilled, as in Billings, where the speculators turned significant profits. In other places, the railroads finally came to sell off their surplus city lots at a great loss in order to avoid further taxation on these undeveloped parcels.

Vyzralek, Frank E., Roger H. Grant, and Charles Bohi, "Railroad Depots: Standardization on the Soo Line," *North Dakota History*, 42 (Winter 1975): 5-25.

In larger cities, the railroads often lavished large amounts of money and architectural talent to ensure that passenger stations and separate freight buildings were sufficiently attractive and impressive. But the majority of depots in America were built in small towns where freight and passenger depots were joined together in what became known as the "combination depot." The standardization of the design of the combination depot was only part of a larger trend toward "brand name" standardization that swept the country during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The authors use the Soo Line in North Dakota as a case study to detail the evolution of the numerous standard depot designs used between 1886 and 1930, and also to trace the historical factors that spurred the construction of variations of these classics.

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